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The Magi in Marco Polo and the Cities in Persia from which they came to worship the Infant Christ.—By A. V. WILLIAMS JACKSON, Professor in Columbia University, New York City.

LEGENDS connected with the Adoration of the Infant Jesus by the Wise Men from the East and the Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles have a very general interest. Tradition is persistent in repeating the idea that the 'kings of the Orient' were Zoroastrians (see my *Zoroaster the Prophet of Ancient Iran*, pp. 97-98, and Bishop Casartelli, *The Magi: a Footnote to Matthew ii. 1*, in *Dublin Review*, Oct. 1902, p. 8). The Apocryphal Gospel of the Infancy (3. 1) even says they came in accordance with a prophecy of Zoroaster, which thus met with fulfilment; and a majority of the Church Fathers agree in regarding Persia as the native country of the Wise Men, without expressly locating their place of origin.¹ A legend is preserved by Marco Polo about the Magi and the three places in Persia from which they came to worship Christ. The story may be familiar to special students of the great Venetian's travels, but it is not generally known to the student of Zoroastrian tradition and Biblical lore. For that reason I wish here to call attention to it and to add some words of comment, especially from the Iranian side.

In speaking of the Magi and their pious journey, Marco Polo mentions the names of three places in Persia from which these 'kings' were supposed to have come.² For convenience I shall quote the passage in the translation by Sir Henry Yule, *Marco Polo*, 3 ed. i. 78, London, 1903. It reads as follows:

'In Persia is the city of Saba from which the Three Magi set out when they went to worship Jesus Christ; and in this city they are buried, in three very large and beautiful monuments, side by side. And above them there is a square building, carefully kept. The bodies

¹ This statement is supported by a careful examination of Migne's *Patrologia* by my pupil, Justin Hartley Moore.

² They were probably Zoroastrian priests, not kings. See Casartelli, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

are still entire, with the hair and beard remaining. One of these was called Jaspar, the second Melchior, and the third Balthasar. Messer Marco Polo asked a great many questions of the people of that city as to those Three Magi, but never one could he find that knew aught of the matter, except that these were three kings who were buried there in days of old. However, at a place three days' journey distant he heard what I am going to tell you. He found a village there which goes by the name of Cala Ataperistan, which is as much as to say "The Castle of the Fire-Worshippers." And the name is rightly applied, for the people there do worship fire.'

Marco Polo next gives, at considerable length, a miraculous account of the details of the visit to the Christ-child, the wonders which the Magi saw, and the prodigies they witnessed on their journey homeward. In concluding his description the Venetian traveller repeats once more the names of the cities by way of résumé, connecting the fire-worship of the kings especially with Ataperistan, whose inhabitants had preserved the legend :

'Such then was the story told by the people of that Castle to Messer Marco Polo; they declared to him for a truth that such was their history, and that one of the three kings was of the city called Saba, the second of Ava, and the third of that very Castle where they still worship fire, with the people of all the country round.'

It has long been recognized that the names 'Saba' and 'Ava' of Marco Polo are probably to be identified with Savah, some fifty miles southwest of Tehran, and with Avah, a village about sixteen miles southeast of Savah.¹ The third city salled 'Cala Ataperistan' by the Venetian traveller and said to be 'three days' journey' from Saba, has not been identified, although Marco Polo is correct in his statement that the name means 'Castle of the Fire-Worshippers,' for it represents the Persian *Kalah-i Ātašparastān*. The question of the location and identity of the place had a special attraction for me when I met with the legend, because I made the journey from Yezd to Tehran, two years ago, over the same route which Marco Polo had traversed in part on his way toward Yezd.

¹ See Yule, *Marco Polo*, i. 81 n. 3, citing also the authority of Consul Keith Abbott, JRGS. xxv. pp. 1-8 (1849). Abbott did not personally visit Avah, but he was told that there was a mound there on which a Gabar castle formerly stood. At Savah he could find no trace of the legend itself.

The difficulties connected with the identification of 'Ataperistan' are many.¹ The term *Kalah-i Ātašparastān* 'Castle of the Fire-Worshippers,' like the similar title *Kalah-i Gabrān*, 'Castle of the Gabars,' is an old designation applied in general to any stronghold which may date back to the fire-worshipping days of Zoroastrian Persia. Owing to the comparative frequency of the designation, it is difficult, but perhaps not impossible, to determine which particular Castle may have been intended by Marco Polo.

On his route toward Yezd there is a town called Na'in situated about two hundred and thirty miles from Savah. I was particularly struck by the evident antiquity of this place when I passed through it on Marco Polo's trail. 'Its ancient fort is known as Kala-i-Gabr, and even the *kanāts* bear Zoroastrian names,' according to Sykes, *Ten Thousand Miles in Persia*, p. 107. The suggestion might be made that in this Castle of the Fire-Worshippers we are to seek for Marco's 'Cala Ataperistan.' An objection to this would be that the distance from Savah to Na'in could hardly have been accomplished in 'three days,' unless by very forced marches or under quite different conditions from what I found. It took me nearly five days, pressing hard, to cover the distance. On the other hand, it may be urged that we are not to take Marco Polo's 'three days' too exactly. Colonel Yule implies as much in his comments upon the passage. In any case it is worth while to mention the town of Na'in as a possible suggestion, because no consideration has previously been given to it in this connection.

More worthy of attention, however, is the suggestion I am about to make regarding Kashan. Travelling from Savah in the direction of Yezd would have brought Marco in 'three days,' at the ordinary rate of travel in Persia, about to the region of Kashan. Four days were allotted to the reverse journey, from Kashan to Savah, by Josafa Barbaro, who went as an envoy over this route in the latter part of the fifteenth century (see the English translation of his travels, *Hakluyt Society*, vol. xlix. p. 72, London, 1873). The Italian friar Odoric of Pordenone, who journeyed the same way about

¹ On the difficulties, especially as to the statement regarding the number of the days, etc., see Yule, *op. cit.*, p. 82 n.

1320, a generation later than Marco, expressly calls Kashan, or *Cassan* as he spells it, 'the city of the Three Kings,' and states that these worshippers set out from there to Jerusalem. See Cordier, *Odoric de Pordenone*, p. 41. The passage reads as follows:

'De la cité de Cassan. De ceste cité m'en alay vers la grant Inde par mer. Si vins par maintes journées à une cité des trois roys qui firent offrande à Jhesu Crist nouvel né. Et appelle on ceste cité de Cassan, cité royal de grant honneur mais Tartre l' ont moult destruite. De cette cité de Cassan jusques en Jherusalem a plus de L journées dont on peut clerement appercevoir que ly troy Roy qui de ceste cité de Cassan furent en xiii journées amené en Jherusalem per vertu divine et non humaine.'

Despite the fact that the name 'Cassan' (Kashan) is four times repeated, some scholars are disposed to regard it as a scribal error for Saba, especially as the latter name occurs in Remusio's collection and in the Palatine Manuscript.¹ Cassan (Kashan) is the correct reading, I believe, and I think this city represents at least the region of Marco Polo's 'Castle of the Fire-Worshippers.' I am the more inclined to this view because Gabarabād (lit. 'Gabar Town'), about twenty miles distant from Kashan on the Isfahan road, although now a deserted place, shows by its name that there was a settlement of fire-worshippers in the vicinity, and there are ruins of a magnificent caravansarai (Bishop, *Journeys in Persia*, i. 232). Kashan existed in the time of the last Zoroastrian monarch, Yazdagard III, for it is mentioned with Kum as having furnished a quota of 20,000 soldiers to the army of that unfortunate king (Curzon, *Persia*, ii. 12; Ouseley, *Persia*, iii. 3, n. 3 and p. 100). There are, moreover, some Zoroastrians in Kashan to-day. The statistics which I gathered in Persia show that about forty-five of these Gabars are doing business in this city.

In any case I believe that the tradition of Kashan or its vicinity as the possible location of the third city from which the Magi came should receive more consideration than it has had from those interested in both Friar Odoric and Marco Polo. I regret that I was not acquainted with the legend at the time

¹ See Yule, *Marco Polo*, i. 81; Cordier, *Odoric*, pp. xcvi and 41. Cordier, in his note, p. 23, argues in favor of Saba, but he admits that Kashan was sacked by the Mongols in 1224.

when I was in Kashan, for I should have made inquiry to see whether it has been preserved down to the present time.

Regarding the source of the legend itself, other scholars have shown, and among them Lord Curzon, *Persia*, ii. p. 6, note, that it would be difficult to prove it to be of Persian origin. It may owe its existence to an association of Saba with the passage in the Psalms, lxxii. 10: 'the kings of Sheba and Seba shall offer gifts' (or according to the Prayer Book, 'the kings of Arabia and Saba'). The Hebrew has *Sēba* (שֶׁבָּא); the Septuagint, βασιλεῖς Ἀράβων καὶ Σαβά; and the Vulgate, *reges Arabum et Saba*. More pertinent still is Isaiah lx. 6, where Ephah (Ava) and Saba (Sheba) stand side by side and are mentioned in connection with gold and frankincense, and hence possibly associated with Avah and Savah. As for the claims of Saba itself to be the burial place of the Three Kings, as Marco Polo describes, I may only say that it has a rival at Urumiah, where I saw the tomb of at least two of the Magi in the old Nestorian church of Mart Miriam; to say nothing of the cathedral of Cologne on the Rhine, where their bodies are said to be interred!